COMPUTERS / HILLEL SEGAL

'Grammatik II' helps improve writing style

If you're one of those few people who would like to consult your high school English teacher on a regular basis, you'll be happy to know about a new PC program called "Grammatik II."

It checks word processing documents for double words, split infinitives, passive voice, mistaken homonyms, gender specific terms, vague words, unbalanced punctuation, misplaced capitalization and general wordiness. It even grades readability, gives you a "redundancy profile," and — to truly make you humble — ranks your document with a Hemingway novel, a Lincoln speech and an insurance policy.

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Used with an IBM PC or PC-compatible computer, the program is designed to help you correct common grammar or style mistakes in letters, proposals or any other text-based file.

The publisher, Reference Software Inc. of San Francisco, claims the program operates with documents prepared by virtually any word processing program. In my tests, however, it had some difficultly reading files created with WordPerfect, one of the most popular word processing programs for personal computers. Control characters inserted in the text to indicate bold print, for example, threw the program into a tizzy and created wild patterns of characters on my computer's screen.

Nonetheless, I was able to ignore those occurrences and still use Grammatik II to evaluate many business letters. Its capabilities are impressive, but the key question that I focused on during my testing was: How helpful is the program in a normal business environment?

Unfortunately, while I found it marginally useful, I doubt if most typists, secretaries or executives will have the patience to use it on a regular basis. Here's why:

✔ It involves a lot a extra effort. Unlike spelling checkers that are either part of word processing programs or memory-resident, to use Grammatik II you must save the document you are working on, load the grammar-checking program, specify the name of the document, and then allow the program to proceed. And instead of allowing you to immediately make use of the suggestions it gives, it merely marks your original file with #'s wherever a change is needed, and you must then reload your word processing document, bring up the document again, search for the #'s in the file, and manually make the changes. Whew!

✔ It gives either too much or too little information. In many cases where a problem is found, it gives a lot of information, but not in simple enough form to make the change easily. For example, with most spelling checkers, if a misspelled word is found, several alternative words are displayed on the screen. By just putting the cursor on one of the words and touching the return key, the misspelled word is replaced with the correct one. With Grammatik II, you might get a message like "passive voice" without clear alternatives presented. As a result, one tends to ignore its suggestions.

✔ Most secretaries won't want it — and good secretaries won't need it. For busy secretaries, it's difficult to even get them to use spelling checkers. I think it would be close to impossible to get them to use this program as well.

✔ There is one important business situation, however, where use of Grammatik II would not only be helpful, but would fully justify the program's $89 cost. That use is for proofing annual reports to stockholders and advertising copy. Despite everything, these highly visible documents often contain silly errors that make companies appear foolish. This program might save you a lot of embarrassment.

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